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Globalizing Social Activism: Sustainable Urban Development

Freedom Plaza: Improvements for an Iconic Landmark

On my way to work at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, I stopped at what looks like an urban space, which is the Freedom Plaza that divides Pennsylvania Avenue near the 1200 NW. I have walked past this mysterious space and have always wondered what the intended use for the land is. This area is surrounded by popular landmarks such as the National Theatre, Pennsylvania Building, and the Federal Triangle to name a few. During a conversation about the purpose of the plaza, a local bystander exclaimed that there really is not a reason to linger around the space for very long unless people are skateboarding across the stone pathways. As I was about to step foot on the elevated terrace of the plaza, I realized that the sidewalks could be a bit wider to prevent accidents especially between skateboarders and pedestrians. I then saw patches of grass that honestly appeared uninviting and placed appropriately for appearance reasons rather than practical use for the neighborhood. The area surrounding these patches of grass is merely the stoned pavement inscribed with famous quotes from early civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



I sat down for ten minutes to observe the scenery and landscape of the Freedom Plaza and was still confused about the lack of liveliness in the area. Apparently, the plaza is known to be a popular protesting location and occasional gathering spot for World Cup matches. Other than that, it serves as a diagonal walking platform for workers to get from one side of Pennsylvania Ave to the other. Even for tourists, the plaza does not provide a reason for travelers to lounge around other than a quick picture. The landscape evokes a modernist appearance from the 1980's and is the result of a design competition from which Robert Venturi, Scott Brown, and George Patton were the appointed architects for the project. Venturi's initial plan to incorporate large models of the Capitol and White House into the design still appears to be a

great concept to make the site more interesting and worth spending time at. And though the grass panels are supposed to symbolize the Mall and the Ellipse, perhaps these patches can expand in size with the right proportions so that these areas can provide more efficient use other than its design purposes. Also, I assume that a lot of money in damage is the result of chips and rough edges created by skateboarders who glide across the granite and marble floors. The police would not have as much of a problem with these skateboarders if grass patches were expanded in size. I did however, enjoy walking through the lush seasonal plantings and perennials. In addition to increasing the size of the grass panels, I also believe that



planting various trees along the plaza could provide shade and make the space look livelier than just a vast and nearly empty piece of land. Since the Freedom Plaza offers a generous amount of space, perhaps community planning can include farmer's markets or occasional food trucks to give people more of a reason to visit the site. Better seating and water features such as public drinking fountains can also attract passerby's and provide more use for the space. The urban infrastructure can be improved by providing not only a recreational space but a place for public culture and art. The present state of the Freedom Plaza does not bring tremendous value or life to the area but

rather contributes to the lack of livelihood on America's Main Street despite its iconic reputation. The space has so much potential to become a hub of activity but remains deserted that can be solved through reconstructing the design and channeling some community programs.

